

The Umbrella Man

BY MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

IT was an insolent day. There are days which, to imaginative minds at least, possess strangely human qualities. Their atmospheres predispose people to crime or virtue, to the calm of good-will, to sneaking vice, or fierce, unprovoked aggression. The day was of the last description. A beast, or a human being in whose veins coursed undisciplined blood, might, as involuntarily as the boughs of trees lash before storms, perform wild and wicked deeds after inhaling that hot air, evil with the sweat of sin-evoked toil, with nitrogen stored from festering sores of nature and the loathsome emanations of suffering life.

It had not rained for days, but the humidity was great. The clouds of dust which arose beneath the man's feet had a horrible damp stickiness. His face and hands were grimy, as were his shoes, his cheap, ready-made suit, and his ignoble hat. However, the man felt a pride in his clothes, for they were at least the garb of freedom. He had come out of prison the day before, and had scorned the suit proffered him by the officials. He had given it away, and bought a new one with a goodly part of his small stock of money. This suit was of a small-checked pattern. Nobody could tell from it that the wearer had just left jail. He had been there for several years for one of the minor offences against the law. His term would probably have been shorter, but the judge had been careless, and he had no friends. Stebbins had never been the sort to make many friends, although he had never cherished animosity toward any human being. Even some injustice in his sentence had not caused him to feel any rancor.

During his stay in the prison he had not been actively unhappy. He had accepted the inevitable—the yoke of the strong for the weak—with a patience which brought almost a sense of enjoyment. But, now that he was free, he

had suddenly become alert, watchful of chances for his betterment. From being a mere kennelled creature, he had become as a hound on the scent, the keenest on earth—that of self-interest. He was changed, while yet living, from a being outside the world to one with the world before him. He felt young, although he was a middle-aged, almost elderly man. He had in his pocket only a few dollars. He might have had more, had he not purchased the checked suit, and had he not given much away. There was another man whose term would be up in a week, and he had a sickly wife and several children. Stebbins, partly from native kindness and generosity, partly from a sentiment which almost amounted to superstition, had given him of his slender store. He had been deprived of his freedom because of money; he said to himself that his return to it should be heralded by the music of it scattered abroad for the good of another.

Now and then as he walked, Stebbins removed his new straw hat, wiped his forehead with a stiff new handkerchief, looked with some concern at the grime left upon it, then felt anxiously of his short crop of grizzled hair. He would be glad when it grew only a little, for it was at present a telltale to observant eyes. Also now and then he took from another pocket a small mirror which he had just purchased, and scrutinized his face. Every time he did so he rubbed his cheeks violently, then viewed with satisfaction the hard glow which replaced the yellow prison pallor. Every now and then, too, he remembered to throw his shoulders back, hold his chin high, and swing out his right leg more freely. At such times he almost swaggered, he became fairly insolent with his new sense of freedom. He felt himself the equal if not the peer of all creation. Whenever a carriage or a motor-car passed him on the country

road he assumed, with the skill of an actor, the air of a business man hastening to an important engagement. However, always his mind was working over a hard problem. He knew that his store of money was scanty, that it would not last long even with the strictest economy; he had no friends; a prison record is sure to leak out when a man seeks a job. He was facing the problem of bare existence.

Although the day was so hot, it was late summer; soon would come the frost and the winter. He wished to live to enjoy his freedom, and all he had for assets was that freedom; which was paradoxical, for it did not signify the ability to obtain work, which was the power of life. Outside the stone wall of the prison he was now enclosed by a subtle, intangible, yet infinitely more unyielding one—the prejudice of his kind against the released prisoner. He was to all intents and purposes a prisoner still, for all his spurts of swagger and the youthful leap of his pulses, and while he did not admit that to himself, yet always, since he had the hard sense of the land of his birth—New England—he pondered that problem of existence. He felt instinctively that it would be a useless proceeding for him to approach any human being for employment. He knew that even the freedom, which he realized through all his senses like an essential perfume, could not yet overpower the reek of the prison. As he walked through the clogging dust he thought of one after another whom he had known before he had gone out of the world of free men and had bent his back under the hand of the law. There were, of course, people in his little native village, people who had been friends and neighbors, but there was not one who had ever loved him sufficiently for him to conquer his resolve to never ask aid of them. He had no relatives except cousins more or less removed, and they would have nothing to do with him.

There had been a woman whom he had meant to marry, and he had been sure that she would marry him; but after he had been a year in prison the news had come to him in a roundabout fashion that she had married another suitor. Even had she remained single he could

not have approached her, least of all for aid. Then, too, through all his term she had made no sign, there had been no letter, no message; and he had received at first letters and flowers and messages from sentimental women. There had been nothing from her. He had accepted nothing, with the curious patience, carrying an odd pleasure with it, which had come to him when the prison door first closed upon him. He had not forgotten her, but he had not consciously mourned her. His loss, his ruin, had been so tremendous that she had been swallowed up in it. When one's whole system needs to be steeled to trouble and pain, single pricks lose importance. He thought of her that day without any sense of sadness. He imagined her in a pretty, well-ordered home with her husband and children. Perhaps she had grown stout. She had been a slender woman. He tried idly to imagine how she would look stout, then by the sequence of self-preservation the imagination of stoutness in another led to the problem of keeping the covering of flesh and fatness upon his own bones. The question now was not of the woman; she had passed out of his life. The question was of the keeping that life itself, the life which involved everything else, in a hard world, which would remorselessly as a steel trap grudge him life and snap upon him, now he was become its prey.

He walked and walked, and it was high noon, and he was hungry. He had in his pocket a small loaf of bread and two frankfurters, and he heard the splashing ripple of a brook. At that juncture the road was bordered by thick woodland. He followed, pushing his way through the trees and undergrowth, the sound of the brook, and sat down in a cool green solitude with a sigh of relief. He bent over the clear run, made a cup of his hand, and drank, then he fell to eating. Close beside him grew some winter-green, and when he had finished his bread and frankfurters he began plucking the glossy, aromatic leaves and chewing them automatically. The savor reached his palate, and his memory awakened before it as before a pleasant tingling of a spur. As a boy how he had loved this little green low-growing plant! It had been one of the luxuries of his

youth. Now, as he tasted it, joy and pathos stirred in his very soul. What a wonder youth had been, what a splendor, what an immensity to be rejoiced over and regretted! The man lounging beside the brook, chewing wintergreen leaves, seemed to realize antipodes. He lived for the moment in the past, and the immutable future, which might contain the past in the revolution of time. He smiled, and his face fell into boyish, almost childish, contours. He plucked another glossy leaf with his hard, veinous old hands. His hands would not change to suit his mood, but his limbs relaxed like those of a boy. He stared at the brook gurgling past in brown ripples, shot with dim prismatic lights, showing here clear green water lines, here inky depths, and he thought of the possibility of trout. He wished for fishing-tackle.

Then suddenly out of a mass of green looked two girls, with wide startled eyes, and rounded mouths of terror which gave vent to screams. There was a scuttling, then silence. The man wondered why the girls were so silly, why they ran. He did not dream of the possibility of their terror of him. He ate another wintergreen leaf, and thought of the woman he had expected to marry when he was arrested and imprisoned. She did not go back to his childish memories. He had met her when first youth had passed, and yet, somehow, the savor of the wintergreen leaves brought her face before him. It is strange how the excitement of one sense will sometimes act as stimulant for the awakening of another. Now the sense of taste brought into full activity that of sight. He saw the woman just as she had looked when he had last seen her. She had not been pretty, but she was exceedingly dainty, and possessed of a certain elegance of carriage which attracted. He saw quite distinctly her small irregular face and the satin-smooth coils of dark hair around her head; he saw her slender dusky hands with the well-cared-for nails and the too prominent veins; he saw the gleam of the diamond which he had given her. She had sent it to him just after his arrest, and he had returned it. He wondered idly whether she still owned it and wore it, and what her husband thought of it. He speculated childishly—somehow im-

prisonment had encouraged the return of childish speculations—as to whether the woman's husband had given her a larger and costlier diamond than his, and he felt a pang of jealousy. He refused to see another diamond than his own upon that slender dark hand. He saw her in a black silk gown which had been her best. There had been some red about it, and a glitter of jet. He had thought it a magnificent gown, and the woman in it like a princess. He could see her leaning back, in her long slim grace, in a corner of a sofa, and the soft dark folds starry with jet sweeping over her knees, and just allowing a glimpse of one little foot. Her feet had been charming, very small and highly arched. Then he remembered that that evening they had been to a concert in the town hall, and that afterward they had partaken of an oyster stew in a little restaurant. Then back his mind travelled to the problem of his own existence, his food and shelter and clothes. He dismissed the woman from his thought. He was concerned now with the primal conditions of life itself. How was he to eat when his little stock of money was gone? He sat staring at the brook; he chewed wintergreen leaves no longer. Instead he drew from his pocket an old pipe and a paper of tobacco. He filled his pipe with care—tobacco was precious; then he began to smoke, but his face now looked old and brooding through the rank blue vapor. Winter was coming, and he had not a shelter. He had not money enough to keep him long from starvation. He knew not how to obtain employment. He thought vaguely of wood-piles, of cutting winter fuel for people. His mind travelled in a trite strain of reasoning. Somehow wood-piles seemed the only available tasks for men of his sort.

Presently he finished his filled pipe, and arose with an air of decision. He went at a brisk pace out of the wood, and was upon the road again. He progressed like a man with definite business in view until he reached a house. It was a large white farmhouse, with many outbuildings. It looked most promising. He approached the side door, and a dog sprang from around a corner and barked, but he spoke, and the dog's tail became eloquent. He was patting the

dog, when the door opened and a man stood looking at him. Immediately the taint of the prison became evident. He had not cringed before the dog, but he did cringe before the man who lived in that fine white house, and who had never known what it was to be deprived of liberty. He hung his head, he mumbled. The house-owner, who was older than he, was slightly deaf. He looked him over curtly. The end of it was he was ordered off the premises, and went; but the dog trailed, wagging, at his heels, and had to be roughly called back. The thought of the dog comforted Stebbins as he went on his way. He had always liked animals. It was something, now he was past a hand-shake, to have the friendly wag of a dog's tail.

The next house was an ornate little cottage with bay-windows, through which could be seen the flower patterns of lace draperies; the Virginia creeper which grew over the house walls was turning crimson in places. Stebbins went around to the back door and knocked, but nobody came. He waited a long time, for he had spied a great pile of uncut wood. Finally he slunk around to the front door. As he went he suddenly reflected upon his state of mind in days gone by; if he could have known that the time would come when he, Joseph Stebbins, would feel culpable at approaching any front door! He touched the electric bell and stood close to the door, so that he might not be discovered from the windows. Presently the door opened the length of a chain, and a fair girlish head appeared. She was one of the girls who had been terrified by him in the woods, but that he did not know. Now again her eyes dilated, and her pretty mouth rounded! She gave a little cry and slammed the door in his face, and he heard excited voices. Then he saw two pale, pretty faces, the faces of the two girls who had come upon him in the wood, peering at him around a corner of the lace in the bay-window, and he understood what it meant—that he was an object of terror to them. Directly he experienced such a sense of mortal insult as he had never known, not even when the law had taken hold of him. He held his head high and went away, his very soul boiling with a sort of shamed rage.

“Those two girls are afraid of me,” he kept saying to himself. His knees shook with the horror of it. This terror of him seemed the hardest thing to bear in a hard life. He returned to his green nook beside the brook and sat down again. He thought for the moment no more of wood-piles, of his life. He thought about those two young girls who had been afraid of him. He had never had an impulse to harm any living thing. A curious hatred toward these living things who had accused him of such an impulse came over him. He laughed sardonically. He wished that they would again come and peer at him through the bushes; he would make a threatening motion for the pleasure of seeing the silly things scuttle away.

After a while he put it all out of mind, and again returned to his problem. He lay beside the brook and pondered, and finally fell asleep in the hot air, which increased in venom, until the rattle of thunder awoke him. It was very dark—a strange livid darkness. “A thunder-storm,” he muttered, and then he thought of his new clothes—what a misfortune it would be to have them soaked. He arose and pushed through the thicket around him into a cart path, and it was then that he saw the thing which proved to be the stepping-stone toward his humble fortunes. It was only a small silk umbrella with a handle tipped with pearl. He seized upon it with joy, for it meant the salvation of his precious clothes. He opened it and held it over his head, although the rain had not yet begun. One rib of the umbrella was broken, but it was still serviceable. He hastened along the cart path; he did not know why, only the need for motion, to reach protection from the storm, was upon him; and yet what protection could be ahead of him in that woodland path? Afterward he grew to think of it as a blind instinct which led him on.

He had not gone far, not more than half a mile, when he saw something unexpected—a small untenanted house. He gave vent to a little cry of joy, which had in it something childlike and pathetic, and pushed open the door and entered. It was nothing but a tiny, unfinished shack, with one room and a

small one opening from it. There was no ceiling; overhead was the tent-like slant of the roof, but it was tight. The dusty floor was quite dry. There was one rickety chair. Stebbins, after looking into the other room to make sure that the place was empty, sat down, and a wonderful wave of content and self-respect came over him. The poor human snail had found his shell; he had a habitation, a roof of shelter. The little dim place immediately assumed an aspect of home. The rain came down in torrents, the thunder crashed, the place was filled with blinding blue lights. Stebbins filled his pipe more lavishly this time, tilted his chair against the wall, smoked, and gazed about him with pitiful content. It was really so little, but to him it was so much. He nodded with satisfaction at the discovery of a fireplace and a rusty cooking-stove.

He sat and smoked until the storm passed over. The rainfall had been very heavy, there had been hail, but the poor little house had not failed of perfect shelter. A fairly cold wind from the northwest blew through the door. The hail had brought about a change of atmosphere. The burning heat was gone. The night would be cool, even chilly.

Stebbins got up and examined the stove and the pipe. They were rusty but appeared trustworthy. He went out and presently returned with some fuel which he had found unwet in a thick growth of wood. He laid a fire handily and lit it. The little stove burned well, with no smoke. Stebbins looked at it, and was perfectly happy. He had found other treasures outside—a small vegetable garden in which were potatoes and some corn. A man had squatted in this little shack for years, and had raised his own garden-truck. He had died only a few weeks ago, and his furniture had been pre-empted with the exception of the stove, the chair, a tilting lounge in the small room, and a few old iron pots and frying-pans. Stebbins gathered corn, dug potatoes, and put them on the stove to cook, then he hurried out to the village store and bought a few slices of bacon, half a dozen eggs, a quarter of a pound of cheap tea, and some salt. When he re-entered the house he looked

as he had not for years. He was beaming. "Come, this is a palace," he said to himself, and chuckled with pure joy. He had come out of the awful empty spaces of homeless life into home. He was a man who had naturally strong domestic instincts. If he had spent the best years of his life in a home instead of a prison, the finest in him would have been developed. As it was, this was not even now too late. When he had cooked his bacon and eggs and brewed his tea, when the vegetables were done, and he was seated upon the rickety chair, with his supper spread before him on an old board propped on sticks, he was supremely happy. He ate with a relish which seemed to reach his soul. He was at home, and eating, literally, at his own board. As he ate he glanced from time to time at the two windows, with broken panes of glass and curtainless. He was not afraid—that was nonsense; he had never been a cowardly man, but he felt the need of curtains or something before his windows to shut out the broad vast face of nature, or perhaps prying human eyes. Somebody might spy the light in the house and wonder. He had a candle stuck in an old bottle by way of illumination. Still, although he would have preferred to have curtains before those windows full of the blank stare of night, he *was* supremely happy.

After he had finished his supper he looked longingly at his pipe. He hesitated for a second, for he realized the necessity of saving his precious tobacco; then he became reckless: such enormous good fortune as a home must mean more to follow; it must be the first of a series of happy things. He filled his pipe and smoked. Then he went to bed on the old couch in the other room, and slept like a child until the sun shone through the trees in flickering lines. Then he rose, went out to the brook which ran near the house, splashed himself with water, returned to the house, cooked the remnant of the eggs and bacon, and ate his breakfast with the same exultant peace with which he had eaten his supper the night before. Then he sat down in the doorway upon the sunken sill and fell again to considering his main problem. He did not smoke. His tobacco was nearly exhausted, and

he was no longer reckless. His head was not turned now by the feeling that he was at home. He considered soberly as to the probable owner of the house, and whether he would be allowed to remain its tenant. Very soon, however, his doubt concerning that was set at rest. He saw a disturbance of the shadows cast by the thick boughs over the cart path by a long outreach of darker shadow which he knew at once for that of a man. He sat upright, and his face at first assumed a defiant, then a pleading expression, like that of a child who desires to retain possession of some dear thing. His heart beat hard as he watched the advance of the shadow. It was slow, as if cast by an old man. The man was old and very stout, supporting one lopping side by a stick, who presently followed the herald of his shadow. He looked like a farmer. Stebbins rose as he approached; the two men stood staring at each other.

"Who be you, neighbor?" inquired the newcomer.

The voice essayed a roughness, but only achieved a tentative friendliness. Stebbins hesitated for a second; a suspicious look came into the farmer's misty blue eyes. Then Stebbins, mindful of his prison record and fiercely covetous of his new home, gave another name. The name of his maternal grandfather seemed suddenly to loom up in printed characters before his eyes, and he gave it glibly. "David Anderson," he said, and he did not realize a lie. Suddenly the name seemed his own. Surely old David Anderson, who had been a good man, would not grudge the gift of his unstained name to replace the stained one of his grandson. "David Anderson," he replied, and looked the other man in the face unflinchingly.

"Where do ye hail from?" inquired the farmer; and the new David Anderson gave unhesitatingly the name of the old David Anderson's birth and life and death place—that of a little village in New Hampshire.

"What do you do for your living?" was the next question, and the new David Anderson had an inspiration. His eyes had lit upon the umbrella which he had found the night before.

"Umbrellas," he replied, laconically,

and the other man nodded. Men with sheaves of umbrellas, mended or in need of mending, had always been familiar features for him.

Then David assumed the initiative; possessed of an honorable business as well as home, he grew bold. "Any objection to my staying here?" he asked.

The other man eyed him sharply. "Smoke much?" he inquired.

"Smoke a pipe sometimes."

"Careful with your matches?"

David nodded.

"That's all I think about," said the farmer. "These woods is apt to catch fire jest when I'm about ready to cut. The man that squatted here before—he died about a month ago—didn't smoke. He was careful, he was."

"I'll be real careful," said David, humbly and anxiously.

"I dun'no' as I have any objections to your staying, then," said the farmer. "Somebody has always squat here. A man built this shack about twenty year ago, and he lived here till he died. Then t'other feller, he come along. Reckon he must have had a little money, didn't work at nothin'! Raised some garden-truck and kept a few chickens. I took them home after he died. You can have them now if you want to take care of them. He rigged up that little chicken-coop back there."

"I'll take care of them," answered David, fervently.

"Well, you can come over by and by and get 'em. There's nine hens and a rooster. They lay pretty well. I ain't no use for 'em. I've got all the hens of my own I want to bother with."

"All right," said David. He looked blissful.

The farmer stared past him into the house. He spied the solitary umbrella. He grew facetious. "Guess the umbrellas was all mended up where you come from if you've got down to one," said he.

David nodded. It was tragically true, that guess.

"Well, our umbrella got turned last week," said the farmer. "I'll give you a job to start on. You can stay here as long as ye want if you're careful about your matches." Again he looked into the house. "Guess some boys have been helpin' themselves to the furniture, most

of it," he observed. "Guess my wife can spare ye another chair, and there's an old table out in the corn-house better than that one you've rigged up, and I guess she'll give ye some old bedding so you can be comfortable. Got any money?"

"A little."

"I don't want any pay for things, and my wife won't; didn't mean that; was wonderin' whether ye had anything to buy vittles with."

"Reckon I can manage till I get some work," replied David, a trifle stiffly. He was a man who had never lived at another than the State's expense.

"Don't want ye to be too short, that's all," said the other, a little apologetically.

"I shall be all right. There are corn and potatoes in the garden, anyway."

"So there be, and one of them hens had better be eat. She don't lay. She'll need a good deal of b'ilin'. You can have all the wood you want to pick up, but I don't want any cut. You mind that or there'll be trouble."

"I won't cut a stick."

"Mind ye don't. Folks call me an easy mark, and I guess myself I am easy up to a certain point, and cuttin' my wood is one of them points. Roof didn't leak in that shower last night, did it?"

"Not a bit."

"Didn't s'pose it would. The other feller was handy, and he kept tinkerin' all the time. Well, I'll be goin'; you can stay here and welcome if you're careful about matches and don't cut my wood. Come over for them hens any time you want to. I'll let my hired man drive you back in the wagon."

"Much obliged," said David, with an inflection that was almost tearful.

"You're welcome," said the other, and ambled away.

The new David Anderson, the good old grandfather revived in his unfortunate, perhaps graceless grandson, reseated himself on the door-step and watched the bulky receding figure of his visitor through a pleasant blur of tears, which made the broad rounded shoulders and the halting columns of legs dance. This David Anderson had almost forgotten that there was unpaid kindness in the whole world, and it seemed to him as if he had seen angels walking up and down.

He sat for a while doing nothing except realizing happiness of the present and of the future. He gazed at the green spread of forest boughs, and saw in pleased anticipation their red and gold tints of autumn; also in pleased anticipation their snowy and icy mail of winter, and himself, the unmailed, defenceless human creature, housed and sheltered, sitting well fed and warm before his own fire. This last happy outlook aroused him. If all this was to be, he must be up and doing. He got up, entered the house, and examined the broken umbrella which was his sole stock in trade. David was a handy man. He at once knew that he was capable of putting it in perfect repair. Strangely enough, for his sense of right and wrong was not blunted, he had no compunction whatever in keeping this umbrella, although he was reasonably certain that it belonged to one of the two young girls who had been so terrified by him. He had a conviction that this monstrous terror of theirs, which had hurt him more than many apparently crueller things, made them quits.

After he had washed his dishes in the brook, and left them in the sun to dry, he went to the village store and purchased a few simple things necessary for umbrella-mending. Both on his way to the store and back he kept his eyes open. He realized that his capital depended largely upon chance and good luck. He considered that he had extraordinary good luck when he returned with three more umbrellas. He had discovered one propped against the counter of the store, turned inside out. He had inquired to whom it belonged, and had been answered to anybody who wanted it. David had seized upon it with secret glee. Then, unheard-of good fortune, he had found two more umbrellas on his way home; one was in an ash can, the other blowing along like a belated bat beside the trolley track. It began to seem to David as if the earth might be strewn with abandoned umbrellas. Before he began his work he went to the farmer's and returned in triumph, driven in the farm wagon, with his cackling hens and quite a load of household furniture, besides some bread and pies. The farmer's wife was one of those who are able to give, and make receiving greater than

giving. She had looked at David, who was older than she, with the eyes of a mother, and his pride had melted away, and he had held out his hands for her benefits, like a child who has no compunctions about receiving gifts because he knows that they are his right of childhood.

Henceforth David prospered—in a humble way, it is true, still he prospered. He journeyed about the country, umbrellas over his shoulder, little bag of tools in hand, and reaped an income more than sufficient for his simple wants. His hair had grown and also his beard. Nobody suspected his history. He met the young girls whom he had terrified on the road often, and they did not know him. He did not, during the winter, travel very far afield. Night always found him at home, warm, well fed, content, and at peace. Sometimes the old farmer on whose land he lived dropped in of an evening, and they had a game of checkers. The old man was a checker expert. He played with unusual skill, but David made for himself a little code of honor. He would never beat the old man, even if he were able, oftener than once out of three evenings. He made coffee on these convivial occasions. He made very good coffee, and they sipped as they moved the men and kings, and the old man chuckled, and David beamed with peaceful happiness.

But the next spring, when he began to realize that he had mended for a while all the umbrellas in the vicinity and that his trade was flagging, he set his precious little home in order, barricaded door and windows, and set forth for farther fields. He was lucky, as he had been from the start. He found plenty of employment, and slept comfortably enough in barns, and now and then in the open. He had travelled by slow stages for several weeks before he entered a village whose familiar look gave him a shock. It was not his native village, but near it. In his younger life he had often journeyed there. It was a little shopping emporium, almost a city. He recognized building after building. Now and then he thought he saw a face which he had once known, and he was thankful that there was hardly any possibility of any one recognizing him.

He had grown gaunt and thin since those far-off days; he wore a beard, grizzled, as was his hair. In those days he had not been an umbrella man. Sometimes the humor of the situation struck him. What would he have said, he the spruce, plump, head-in-the-air young man, if anybody had told him that it would come to pass that he would be an umbrella man lurking humbly in search of a job around the back doors of houses? He would laugh softly to himself as he trudged along, and the laugh would be without the slightest bitterness. His lot had been so infinitely worse, and he had such a happy nature, yielding sweetly to the inevitable, that he saw now only cause for amusement.

He had been in that vicinity about three weeks when one day he met the woman. He knew her at once, although she was greatly changed. She had grown stout, although, poor soul! it seemed as if there had been no reason for it. She was not unwieldy, but she was stout, and all the contours of earlier life had disappeared beneath layers of flesh. Her hair was not gray, but the bright brown had faded, and she wore it tightly strained back from her seamed forehead, although it was thin. One had only to look at her hair to realize that she was a woman who had given up, who no longer cared. She was humbly clad in a blue cotton wrapper, she wore a dingy black hat, and she carried a tin pail half full of raspberries. When the man and woman met they stopped with a sort of shock, and each changed face grew like the other in its pallor. She recognized him and he her, but along with that recognition was awakened a fierce desire to keep it secret. His prison record loomed up before the man, the woman's past loomed up before her. She had possibly not been guilty of much, but her life was nothing to waken pride in her. She felt shamed before this man whom she had loved, and who felt shamed before her. However, after a second the silence was broken. The man recovered his self-possession first.

He spoke casually.

"Nice day," said he.

The woman nodded.

"Been berrying?" inquired David. The woman nodded again.

David looked scrutinizingly at her pail. "I saw better berries real thick a piece back," said he.

The woman murmured something. In spite of herself a tear trickled over her fat, weather-beaten cheek. David saw the tear, and something warm and glorious like sunlight seemed to waken within him. He felt such tenderness and pity for this poor feminine thing who had not the strength to keep the tears back, and was so pitifully shorn of youth and grace, that he himself expanded. He had heard in the town something of her history. She had made a dreadful marriage, tragedy and suspicion had entered her life, and the direst poverty. However, he had not known that she was in the vicinity. Somebody had told him that she was out West.

"Living here?" he inquired.

"Working for my board at a house back there," she muttered. She did not tell him that she had come as a female "hobo" in a freight car from the Western town where she had been finally stranded. "Mrs. White sent me out for berries," she added. "She keeps boarders, and there were no berries in the market this morning."

"Come back with me a piece and I will show you where I saw the berries real thick," said David.

He turned himself about, and she followed a little behind, the female failure in the dust cast by the male. Neither spoke until David stopped and pointed to some bushes where the fruit hung thick on bending, slender branches.

"Here," said David. Both fell to work. David picked handfuls of berries and cast them gayly into the pail. "What is your name?" he asked, in an undertone.

"Jane Waters," she replied, readily. Her husband's name had been Waters, or the man who had called himself her husband, and her own middle name was Jane. The first was Sara. David remembered at once. "She is taking her own middle name and the name of the man she married," he thought. Then he asked, plucking berries, with his eyes averted:

"Married?"

"No," said the woman, flushing deeply.

David's next question betrayed him. "Husband dead?"

"I haven't any husband," she replied, like the Samaritan woman.

She had married a man already provided with another wife, although she had not known it. The man was not dead, but she spoke the entire miserable truth when she replied as she did. David assumed that he was dead. He felt a throb of relief, of which he was ashamed, but he could not down it. He did not know what it was that was so alive and triumphant within him: love, or pity, or the natural instinct of the decent male to shelter and protect. Whatever it was, it was dominant.

"Do you have to work hard?" he asked.

"Pretty hard, I guess. I expect to."

"And you don't get any pay?"

"That's all right; I don't expect to get any," said she, and there was bitterness in her voice.

In spite of her stoutness she was not as strong as the man. She was not at all strong, and moreover the constant presence of a sense of injury at the hands of life filled her very soul with a subtle poison to her weakening vitality. She was a child hurt and worried and bewildered, although she was to the average eye a stout, able-bodied, middle-aged woman; but David had not the average eye, and he saw her as she really was, not as she seemed. There had always been about her a little weakness and dependency which had appealed to him. Now they seemed fairly to cry out to him like the despairing voices of the children which he had never had, and he knew he loved her as he had never loved her before, with a love which had budded and flowered and fruited and survived absence and starvation. He spoke abruptly.

"I've about got my business done in these parts," said he. "I've got quite a little money, and I've got a little house, not much, but mighty snug, back where I come from. There's a garden. It's in the woods. Not much passing nor going on."

The woman was looking at him with incredulous pitiful eyes like a dog's. "I hate much goin' on," she whispered.

"Suppose," said David, "you take those berries home and pack up your things. Got much?"

"All I've got will go in my bag."

"Well, pack up; tell the madam where

you live that you're sorry, but you're worn out—"

"God knows I am," cried the woman, with sudden force, "worn out!"

"Well, you tell her that, and say you've got another chance, and—"

"What do you mean?" cried the woman, and she hung upon his words like a drowning thing.

"Mean? Why, what I mean is this. You pack your bag and come to the parson's back there, that white house."

"I know—"

"In the mean time I'll see about getting a license, and—"

Suddenly the woman set her pail down and clutched him by both hands. "Say you are not married," she demanded; "say it, swear it!"

"Yes, I do swear it," said David. "You are the only woman I ever asked to marry me. I can support you. We sha'n't be rolling in riches, but we can be comfortable, and—I rather guess I can make you happy."

"You didn't say what your name was," said the woman.

"David Anderson."

The woman looked at him with a strange expression, the expression of one who loves and respects, even reveres, the isolation and secrecy of another soul. She understood, down to the depths of her being she understood. She had lived a hard life, she had her faults, but she was fine enough to comprehend and hold sacred another personality. She was very pale, but she smiled. Then she turned to go.

"How long will it take you?" asked David.

"About an hour."

"All right. I will meet you in front of the parson's house in an hour. We will go back by train. I have money enough."

"I'd just as soon walk." The woman spoke with the utmost humility of love and trust. She had not even asked where the man lived. All her life she had followed him with her soul, and it would go hard if her poor feet could not keep pace with her soul.

"No, it is too far; we will take the train. One goes at half past four."

At half past four the couple, man and wife, were on the train speeding toward the little home in the woods. The woman had frizzled her thin hair pathetically and ridiculously over her temples; on her left hand gleamed a white diamond. She had kept it hidden; she had almost starved rather than part with it. She gazed out of the window at the flying landscape, and her thin lips were curved in a charming smile. The man sat beside her, staring straight ahead as if at happy visions.

They lived together afterward in the little house in the woods, and were happy with a strange crystallized happiness at which they would have mocked in their youth, but which they now recognized as the essential of all happiness upon earth. And always the woman knew what she knew about her husband, and the man knew about his wife, and each recognized the other as old lover and sweetheart come together at last, but always each kept the knowledge from the other with an infinite tenderness of delicacy which was as a perfumed garment veiling the innermost sacredness of love.

